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Only half of Dutch doctors report euthanasia, study says

A study shows that in 2001 just over half of doctors in the Netherlands fulfilled their legal responsibility to report their actions concerning euthanasia.

Researchers for the study, which was commissioned by the Dutch government, admit dissatisfaction with the levels of reporting but deny that there is cause for serious concern. Instead they say that reporting levels have increased steadily since the last report commissioned by the government six years ago and that the overall number of cases of euthanasia has stabilised.

The researchers were able to extrapolate the number of cases of euthanasia each year in the Netherlands from written questionnaires sent to doctors concerning 5500 deaths and from confidential interviews with about 600 doctors.

The study shows that since 1996 reporting of cases of euthanasia cases increased from 41% to 54% of cases.

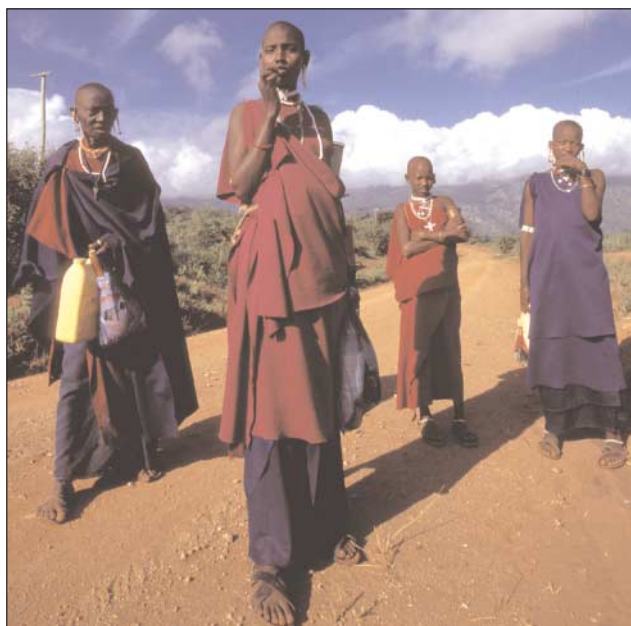
The researchers estimated that, overall, 3500 cases of euthanasia occurred in 2001, 2.5% of all deaths. This compares with 3200 (2.4%) in 1995. The number of assisted suicides fell from 400 in 1995 to 300 in 2001.

The total number of requests for euthanasia remained the same, at about 9700. Of these, 39% were accepted by the doctor in 2001, a similar percentage to that in 1995. The number of cases where a doctor ended a patient's life without an explicit request, which has caused controversy in the past, also remained the same, at around 900.

Tony Sheldon *Utrecht*

Surgeon suspended in transplant row

Walter Land, the internationally renowned transplant surgeon from Munich University Hospital, Grosshadern, was suspended



CAROLINE PENN/PANOS PICTURES

Exhibition shows celebrities' defining moments

This photograph of Masai women in Tanzania sums up a defining moment for documentary film maker Pratibha Parmar, a Kenyan Asian woman who came to England in 1967.

Ms Parmar made a film about female genital mutilation in Kenya that showed the work of Agnes, a Masai woman who walks from village to village educating people about how the practice ruins lives.

The picture is part of an exhibition organised by Voluntary Service Overseas, in association with Panos Pictures and the *Guardian*. The exhibition features the defining moments of cultural discovery by a range of celebrities, including explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes, MP Oona King, and veteran of the Falklands war Simon Weston.

The exhibition is being held at the Guardian and Observer Archive and Visitor Centre, 60 Farringdon Road, London EC1R 3GA, from 5 June to 28 June.

Annabel Ferriman *BMJ*

last week from his position as head of the transplant unit.

Earlier this month Dr Land had left Munich for Abu Dhabi, without permission from the medical director and the dean, to carry out a kidney transplantation in Al-Mafraq Hospital. Furthermore, ethical and legal doubts were raised about a possible involvement in organ trade.

Al-Mafraq Hospital had announced that Dr Land and his team had performed a transplantation on a member of a sheikh's family. Altogether six doctors and three nurses and assistants from the Munich hospital had travelled to Abu Dhabi, only three of them using their holiday entitlement. Just one of the doctors had general permission to practise elsewhere, said Günter Auburger, managing

director of the Munich hospital.

He would not specify the consequences for the staff members, apart from Dr Land's suspension, which will be reconsidered when he is back in Munich, presumably next week.

Annette Tuffs *Heidelberg*

Surgeon calls for legalisation of payment to kidney donors

One of Britain's leading transplant surgeons has called for the legalisation of payment for kidney donations. Mr Nadey Hakim, a consultant general surgeon at St Mary's Hospital, London, who specialises in kidney transplan-

tion, told BBC Radio Four's *File on 4* programme last week that the current Human Organ Transplant Act merely drives patients to seek organs abroad, often leading to poor outcomes.

"As this trade is going on anyway, why not have a controlled trade where if someone wants to donate a kidney for a particular price, that would be acceptable?" said Mr Hakim. "If it's done safely the donor will not suffer."

In the past year two cases at the General Medical Council have seen doctors found guilty of serious professional misconduct for offering to put undercover journalists posing as patients' relatives in contact with paid donors in India. One of the doctors, Jarnail Singh, had refused an offer of £5000 (\$8200; €6950) for his services, saying he did it because of medical need.

Kidneys suitable for people of south Asian origin are in particularly short supply in Britain, making India a prime destination for "transplant tourism." While south Asians comprise only 4% of the population, they account for 14% of the kidney transplant waiting list.

Owen Dyer *London*

Smallpox vaccination confers long lasting immunity

Immunity to smallpox after vaccination can be long lasting, suggests a study conducted by Oregon Health Sciences University researchers and presented at the meeting of the American Society for Microbiology in Washington, DC.

The finding will reassure people in the United States who are worried about bioterrorism, because it means that any attempt to induce a smallpox epidemic is likely to be of limited effect, as 95% of US citizens over the age of 35 years have been vaccinated against the virus.

Moreover, the finding may spur unvaccinated people to be vaccinated and reassure people who have opted not to be vaccinated that they retain some level of protection against the disease from vaccinations

received decades ago.

The researchers found that everyone who had been vaccinated had functional antibodies and that activity against the virus was relatively robust, regardless of time since vaccination. However, the T cell response did wane over time.

Participants who had had a booster vaccine had better immunity, but more than two revaccinations did not increase protection considerably.

The results support other work that found long term immunity from smallpox vaccination. A recent small study from North Carolina found a durable T cell response to vaccinia in people immunised up to 35 years earlier and concluded that smallpox vaccine could give long lasting immunity (*New England Journal of Medicine* 2002;347:689-90).

Deborah Josefson *Nebraska*

Subspecialty of oncoplastic breast surgery is needed to meet demand

A new subspecialty of oncoplastic breast surgery is needed, a new report urges. The proposals would mean specialist training being shorter and starting earlier and that specialists would be available more quickly for a growing number of patients, says the report, in the journal *Breast* (2003;12:161-2).

An accompanying editorial by Professor Michael Baum welcomes the proposals as long overdue: "Over the last 15 years my subject has changed dramatically and along with this the technical challenge of oncoplastic surgery has emerged. Nowhere along the line did I have the opportunity for time out to train in plastic and reconstructive surgery, the one skill I would have needed to be considered a complete 'breast man.' I personally believe that the time is long overdue to take a serious look at the training needs of those who wish to specialise in the care of women with breast cancer."

He adds, "After a probationary period as a senior house officer/junior resident studying

pre- and post-operative care on how to suture wounds so they won't fall apart, I see no reason why this pluri-potential general surgeon shouldn't start to differentiate into a breast specialist."

The report, from Mr Muhammed Humzah and Dr Joanna Skillman of Queen Victoria Hospital, East Grinstead, Sussex, says that although mortality from breast cancer is decreasing, screening has increased detection, leading to a higher demand for intervention and to greater expectations.

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

World body reviews doctors' links to drug industry

No individual doctors should receive direct payment from commercial companies to cover travelling expenses, room and board at a conference, or compensation for their time, according to proposed guidelines from the World Medical Association.

The association is developing the guidelines to clarify the relationship between doctors and commercial enterprises, including the pharmaceutical industry. Underpinning the proposals is the need for doctors to disclose and avoid competing interests.

The guidelines, discussed at a recent meeting of the association, acknowledge the complex nature of the relationship between doctors and industry.

However, the association acknowledged that industry support was often important, enabling medical research, scientific conferences, and continuing medical education. So, rather than forbidding any connection between doctors and industry it argued that it was better to establish guidelines for ethical relations.

The draft statement, based on guidelines already established by the World Health Organization, national medical associations, and the pharmaceutical industry, includes recommendations for industry sponsorship of conferences, research, and gifts to doctors.

Susan Mayor *London*

Consultants threaten strike over contract stalemate

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

Consultants in England have said they will ballot their colleagues on industrial action if the health secretary, Alan Milburn, refuses to return to the negotiating table over their new contract in the next three months.

All but a handful of the 200 consultants' representatives from English trusts attending a special conference last week gave overwhelming support to a proposal by Dr Anna Athow, from North Middlesex Hospital in London, to "defend the NHS" and fight for national conditions for hospital consultants, backed by industrial action if necessary.

Last October consultants voted by two to one to reject the proposed contract and have largely resisted local implementation and incentive payments offered by Mr Milburn if they accept the new deal.

Dr Paul Miller, chairman of the consultants committee, said he had been heartened by support from the profession but that the government's refusal to enter into fresh negotiations had forced the committee to consider legal action and other ways to confront what one delegate called a "bully government."

"We face a government which seems determined to force through bad policy for the NHS and refuses to listen," he said. "Changing these proposals is the thing we must do. We must do it because our patients need to know that when their consultant recommends treatment, care, or surgery, they are doing so on the basis of what is best for the patient, using the best of their medical training and judgment. Our patients must never have to fear that their treatment is recommended simply to meet the political target of the month."

The committee has issued England's 20 000 consultants with guidance on how to work within their contract to improve their working conditions in the absence of a new contract. The consultants have been told to request a review of their job plan and to insist on their legal rights under the European working time directive to work no more than 48 hours a week. Any extra hours worked should be paid at an overtime rate or taken as time off.



Dr Paul Miller: heartened by support from the profession

Dr Miller said their actions were not about money and that consultants had left a £133m (\$218m; €185m) promised pay deal on the negotiating table. "This is about trust—the very essence of the doctor-patient relationship. This is about patients knowing their doctors are free to give their best advice," he said.

If this work to rule fails to bring Mr Milburn back to the negotiating table, Dr Miller said the committee was already preparing to ballot its members over industrial action if the motion is backed at their annual conference on 19 June.

Jo Hilborne, deputy chairwoman of the junior doctors committee, said that although junior doctors cannot take part in industrial action, there was widespread support among them for consultants to do so to achieve the best deal possible. "It is fair to say that juniors would not pick up any work that is left undone by consultants during industrial action or working within their contract," she said. □